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May 12, 2015

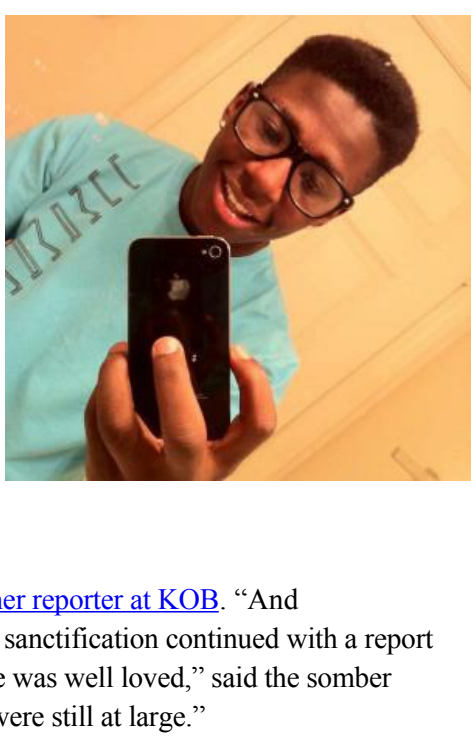
The Ballad of Jaquise

By Colin Flaherty

Before Jaquise Lewis lost his life defending his friends from an act of racist white mob violence, he was universally loved and admired.

Fun to be around, said one relative. Never got into any trouble, his aunt remembered. One after another, they lined up to tell the Albuquerque reporters the story of how Jaquise was in the "wrong place at the wrong time."

Alternately an innocent victim and a hero saving his friends.



The kind words poured down like rain shortly after that day in March when a bunch of white skaters attacked Jaquise and his friends at a skateboard park when all they were trying to do was have a little fun at a birthday party.

"Several dozen people remember a teenager who died too young," intoned Tessa Mentus, the anchor at KOB news as she introduced a story on a memorial for the recently deceased Jaquise. "Gunmen opened fire at the Los Altos skateboard park last night, and 17-year old Jaquise Lewis died at the scene."

"Six other people were shot," said another reporter at KOB. "And understandably people were upset." The sanctification continued with a report from the scene of the memorial: "Jaquise was well loved," said the somber reporter Ryan Luby. "And the shooters were still at large."

And as for the gang colors on display and gang signs many of the mourners were flashing? No one really noticed. Or cared. They were too busy consoling one of Jaquise's homeboys who attended the memorial in his hospital gown, who was also a "victim" of the dirty white boys and their racist violence.

The next day, it got real: several friends of Jaquise reported that someone burned down their makeshift memorial. And much like the shooting of Jaquise itself, there could be only one explanation how a makeshift collection of candles and paper displays and ribbons left unattended in a windy parking lot could catch fire: White Racism.

Friends of Jaquise "say the destruction of his memorial was a hate crime," reported KRQE. "To be honest, I think it was racism," said a friend of the fallen teenager.

"We spoke to the victim's grandfather earlier today," said a reporter from KRQE. "And he said several of his family members said race may have played a role" in the death of the young Jaquise.

And that is how it stood for several weeks: White people running amok in Albuquerque. Shooting unarmed black teenagers for no reason whatsoever.

Then last week, with the help of video, the story… evolved.

There was no birthday party.

Jaquise and his friends went to the park to create havoc and violence.

They stole a skateboard -- which the police spokesman dutifully reported by saying Jaquise and his friends "borrowed it" and became upset when the skaters asked for them to give it back.

There was no fight, as earlier accounts had it: Jaquise and his friends were assaulting the skaters. And they were surprised when one of the skaters actually defended himself.

And the shooter? Oh yeah, that was Jaquise.

"We believe Jaquise Lewis was the one who fired those rounds," said a police spokesman after reviewing pictures of the event for reporters last week at an oddly apologetic news conference.

Jaquise in turn was shot by a skater whom police say was acting in self-defense.

This was not the angelic Jaquise's first encounter with the law or a gun: just a few weeks before, he was arrested after shooting his friend in the butt with a handgun. Jaquise said it was an accident. The night he died, Jaquise was not even supposed to be out of his house without the permission of a court -- which he did not have, said the Albuquerque *Journal*.

The skateboarders cooperated fully with the investigation, said the police. But friends of Jaquise, the ones who stole the skateboards and started the assault, did not. Police are still looking for them.

As the real story emerged of Jaquise and his friends as predators, not victims, some of his friends and family remain unconvinced -- and upset. Not the least of which was the attorney for the family of Jaquise. A few weeks before, he had been looking at a major personal injury lawsuit, appearances on cable TV, and all the other perks lawyers get for helping the downtrodden fight for justice. Especially when they are victims of white racism.

The police press conference put an end to those legal dreams. Even so, the lawyer put on a game face for the Albuquerque *Journal*: "If they're taking the position today that suggests Jaquise Lewis died from someone acting in self-defense, give us the entirety of the evidence, let us, the community, judge this process," said Ahmad Assed, a defense attorney representing the family. "Don't let Albuquerque Police Department call the shots in this conversation. The African-American community deserves better."

Some suggested the lawyer could start by talking to friends of his client. The missing ones who "were intimately involved in the encounter," as police put it.

One of many cousins of Jaquise put an exclamation mark on the lawyer's remarks in the comments section: "This is ridiculous," said the correspondent self-identified as MzLadiBoss. "Now yall playin by race… now it's a race thing. My lil cuzin was murdered (and now police) wanna let the killer loose cuz he's not black. That's bullshit. It's funny how damn every white person get off and every black person either do/face life behind bars or death penalty. SMH sad sick world."

The following day, the First Lady of the United States of America picked up the chorus at a graduation ceremony at a black college. She said reminded the graduates of Tuskegee Institute that they are victims of relentless white racism all the time, everywhere and that explains everything. Including why police are always picking on people who look like them for no reason whatsoever.

"We've both felt the sting of those daily slights throughout our entire lives -- the folks who crossed the street in fear of their safety; the clerks who kept a close eye on us in all those department stores; the people at formal events who assumed we were the "help" -- and those who have questioned our intelligence, our honesty, even our love of this country," she told the black graduating class of the Tuskegee Institute.

Perhaps she was referring to her own experience at Princeton, and the reaction her senior thesis received from the late great Christopher Hitchens: "To describe [the thesis] as hard to read would be a mistake; the thesis cannot be 'read' at all, in the strict sense of the verb. This is because it wasn't written in any known language."

Maybe her writing has improved, because the message in this speech was loud and clear, talking about the "nagging worries that you're going to get stopped or pulled over for absolutely no reason; the fear that your job application will be overlooked because of the way your name sounds; the agony of sending your kids to schools that may no longer be separate, but are far from equal; the realization that no matter how far you rise in life, how hard you work to be a good person, a good parent, a good citizen -- for some folks, it will never be enough. "

"And as we've seen over the past few years, those feelings are real. They're rooted in decades of structural challenges that have made too many folks feel frustrated and invisible. And those feelings are playing out in communities like Baltimore and Ferguson and so many others across this country."

Like Albuquerque.

Colin Flaherty is the author of the scintillating best seller on then epidemic of black mob violence and black on white crime, Don't Make the Black Kids Angry. You can win a FREE autographed copy of his new book by signing up for his newsletter here.

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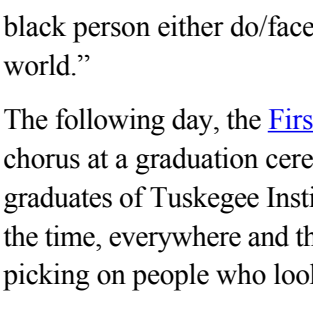

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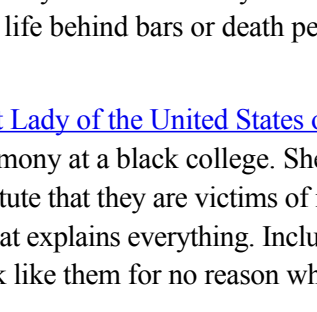

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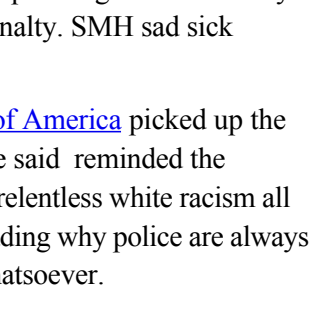

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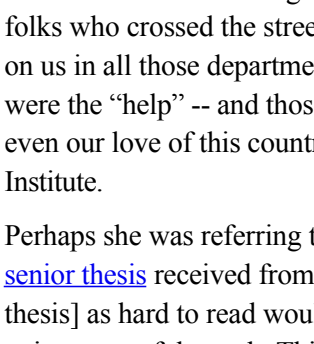

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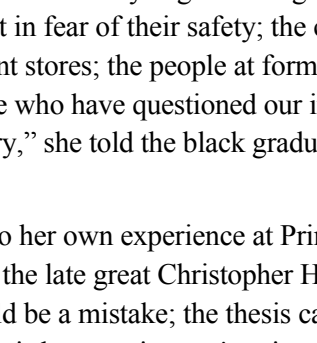

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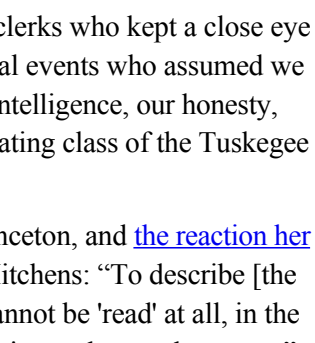

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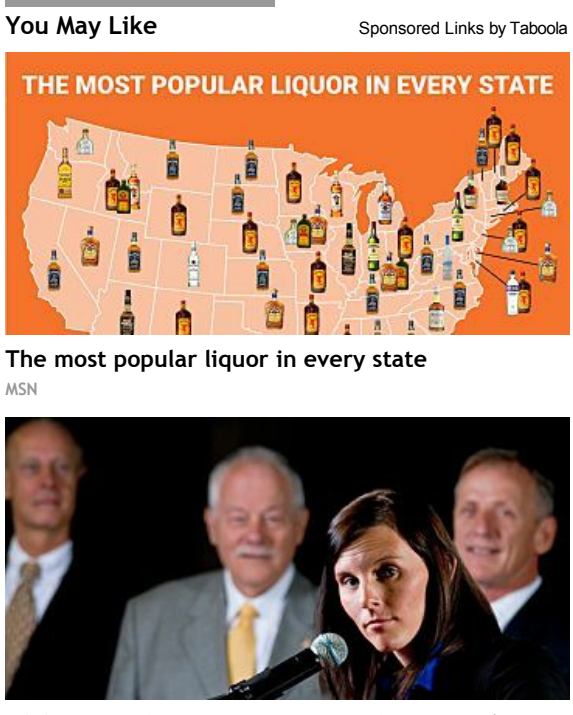

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